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AUTHOR Lai, Morris K.
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ABSTRACT

Evaluation has generally not been accountable in terms of its promoting a "net-benefit." The term "net-benefit" rather than "benefit" is used because a given amount of legitimate benefit may come at the expense of an inordinate expenditure of evaluation resources or energy. If any aspect of an evaluation is unlikely to provide any net-benefit to humanity as far as the overall evaluation is concerned, then it probably shouldn't be done given the relative scarcity of evaluation resources and energy. Examples of net-nonbeneficial energy-wasting evaluation activities include: (1) carrying out overly complex statistical analyses; (2) dissemination and use (or lack thereof) of the draft version of the Standards produced by the Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation which forbade the draft version to be cited, duplicated, or distributed without written permission of the Chairman of the Standards Committee; and (3) the publication of articles including excess spending of time in adhering to style guidelines. Determining whether an evaluation activity has the potential to lead to net-benefit is clearly not always an easy task, but it is an effort toward achieving accountability. (RL)

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"NET BENEFIT," A NEGLECTED METAEVALUATION CRITERION

Morris K. Lai

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Introduction

Today, many people in education would readily agree that educational evaluation is a genuine profession. Advanced degrees in evaluation are offered at many universities, semi-official standards have been published, and many evaluators certainly charge enough for their services. Unfortunately, as in any profession, many members have lost sight of the rationale for their existence. That rationale is not to keep program developers and coordinators honest and in line. It is not to display academic prowess in developing evaluation designs or using statistics or testing. It is not to provide information to decision makers who then use the data to promote their own self-interest concerns.

Purported Goals of Evaluation

Scriven (1967) would have us believe that the goal of evaluation is to ascertain merit. On the other hand, Stufflebeam et al. (1971) say that providing information for judging decision alternatives is why evaluation takes place. Others such as Parlett and Hamilton (1977) would settle for evaluation as enlightenment whereby the level of the discussion is raised.

Notice that none of these references to what the goal of evaluation is mentions directly any net benefit to the recipient of the program or product. What good is the ascertainment of merit if no one benefits as a result? As for decision making with the use of evaluative data, can an evaluation have been worthwhile even if no one benefits as a result of a decision made? Although enlightenment may be considered a benefit to some, this approach implies that the professionals involved are the main focus of the benefit-providing potential of the evaluation. Granted that the determination of

merit, the decision making, and the enlightenment are valued because of their being hopefully conducive to the subsequent production of beneficial effects, nonetheless, evaluation has generally not been accountable in terms of its promoting a net benefit.

Net Benefit as a Goal of Evaluation

The term "net-benefit" rather than "benefit" has been used because a given amount of legitimate benefit may come at the expense of an inordinate expenditure of evaluation resources or energy. In a simplistic sense, such an evaluation or evaluative activity would not have been worth the effort. Notice that Scriven's concept that evaluation can and should be cost-free (he means, of course, net cost-free) does not go far enough. An evaluation that was cost-free only in the sense that it saved more money than it cost would have been worthwhile only if that money saved had then been used to provide a worthwhile benefit.

Within an evaluation, the net-benefit criterion should also be applied. If any aspect of an evaluation is unlikely to provide any net-benefit as far as the overall evaluation is concerned, then it probably shouldn't be done given the relative scarcity of evaluation resources and energy.

Despite widespread fiscal austerity, evaluators have not generally given credence to the evaluation energy crisis that exists. Much of the energy spent by evaluators does not result in a net benefit to anybody, except perhaps to the evaluator who is paid for services rendered. Evaluation does not yet have the luxury, that basic research perhaps has, of justifying a major part of its existence on the possibility of future, unknown uses of its current findings.

House (1976) touched upon the subject in his treatise on justice in evaluation. In his discussion, however, he focused on the overall effects of evaluation on a particular population. In an example cited in his article, an evaluation activity that would violate an individual's self-esteem or would leave a respondent vulnerable would be deleted even if the evaluation design suffered from a technical viewpoint. In a definite sense, it was rather easy for House to recommend that an activity that resulted in detriment to an individual be dropped from an evaluation.

It is contended that another step must be taken; namely, the approval or disapproval of evaluation activities must take into account the net benefit of the decision. Activities that are not likely to result in net benefit to humanity should probably be dropped even though no negative results (other than wasted energy) may occur through their use. Activities that are likely to result in net benefit should be carried out if possible.

Examples of Net Non-Beneficial, Energy-Wasting Evaluation Activities

One frequent energy waster is the activity of carrying out overly complex statistical analyses. In many evaluations, the use of multiple regression with exact probabilities resulted in no benefit to anyone. Yet it used up a substantial amount of evaluation energy in the form of computer use, personnel time (for planning, writing and reading), and paper (computer as well as draft and final report). And yet as Bryk (1978, P.40) has noted: "And despite the fact that our computer technology permits incredible complex multivariate analyses of such data in the individual context it cannot rival the integrative capacity of the clinical mind."

Baker (1976) has advocated a lean data approach to evaluation. Her colleagues at the Center for the Study of Evaluation at UCLA, however, in the official CSE monograph series (in particular, numbers 4 and 5) do not appear to be disciples or precursors by any means. A major argument made by those advocating the lean data approach is that it is better to do a good job on a few critical variables than to do a shallow job on a comprehensive set of variables. It is important, however, to go one step further and argue that a comprehensive set of variables should in general not be investigated even if in-depth analyses were feasible and affordable. Only if such analyses are likely to result in some net benefit should they be carried out. Otherwise, valuable evaluation energy is being wasted.

A negative example at the national level was produced by the Committee on Standards for Evaluation. The Standards themselves are not seen as a waste of evaluation energy; however, the method of dissemination and use (or lack thereof) of the draft version was an example of non-net-beneficial thinking. The draft copy, dated November, 1978, on every page had the following warning: "Not for citation, duplication, or distribution without the written permission of the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation." On a particular occasion when such permission was requested in order that the Standards be (1) used to metaevaluate an isolated Title IV project and (2) reproduced for distribution to advanced graduate students in an NIE-sponsored seminar, the request was denied, with the main reason cited being that of the confusion that might arise if drafts of a document were used, and subsequently a final version came out. Although the denial of the Committee was honored, a question was raised: Which situation would be of more (net) benefit?

Situation	Benefit	Detriment
1. Draft version of Standards not citable or distributable	No future confusion when final form out	Project evaluation denied use of a respectable version of the Standards--Graduate students not allowed to obtain copy of Draft Standards
2. Draft version of Standards citable and distributable	Project metaevaluated with draft of Standards; Graduate students have copy of draft of Standards to serve as guide	Possible future confusion over which form of Standards is being cited

It is argued that the use of the draft version of the Standards could have been of enough net benefit to consumers that the denial of permission to cite or reproduce them was unwarranted.

Another example of evaluation energy waste comes from the publication field. Because of established styles and some editors' hangups, a lot of energy is wasted in the process of getting articles published. The importance of style guidelines such as provided by the Publication Manual (1974) of the American Psychological Association is recognized; however, strict adherence for some writers may require an inordinate amount of time which could be better spent doing something else. When listing references, for example, is it really of net benefit to have the author spend time on learning (and implementing) the fact that (1) a comma must be placed before the ampersand even though there are only two co-authors, (2) a single space must occur after each period following an author's first name initials (no full names, please!), and (3) the rules for capitalization within an article title listed in the references section are different from those for journal names? Again, a caution is in order. The following of an established (and, hopefully, empirically

sound) style is not being criticized. What is being challenged is the practice of adhering to a style even to the detriment of the allocation of evaluation energy. More generally each of the rituals of publishing is being challenged to meet the following criterion: Does it have the potential to result in a net benefit to humanity--or could the time and energy be better spent in another potentially more beneficial activity?

It is, of course, much easier to advocate than to carry out a net-beneficial, energy-efficient evaluation. Ideas on how to conserve evaluation energy or produce net-benefit will not be discussed in depth in this presentation. Promising areas/concepts include rules of thumb (Lai, 1979), lean data (Baker, 1976), styleless journals, efficiency/beneficial checklists (analogous to Scriven's [1974]), and recognition of the paper shortage.

Educational Importance

The conservation of evaluation energy must itself be assessed against the criterion of net potential benefit. If it is assumed that evaluation can have a beneficial effect, then the efficient use of evaluation energy allows more things to be evaluated within the existing evaluation energy supply. A stronger argument, however, is needed.

Despite Parkinson's Law, which might suggest that evaluation would simply expand to consume any extra energy made available, it would appear legitimate to argue that saving evaluation energy would enable more productivity (perhaps in non-evaluative areas) and thus result in increased benefits to various parties. Not only would evaluators be wasting less time and energy, but audiences of evaluation reports would also waste less time learning about evaluation activities that benefit no one.

Conclusion

Determining whether an evaluation activity has the potential to lead to net benefit is clearly not always an easy task; however, it is not any easier to determine whether an evaluation has met accuracy, utility, propriety, and feasibility standards. A net-beneficial, energy-conserving approach to evaluation emphasizes that evaluation indeed is a most important human activity. At the same time, such an approach reminds us that evaluation should not be a game in which awards are made on the basis of outward appearance. Many extremely "proper" evaluations are actually energy-wasters and non-beneficial. They should be treated accordingly.

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